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## **Campaign for Community Values: Media Coverage of the Heartland Presidential Forum**

December 1, 2007, Des Moines, Iowa

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# THE SWAMP

Tribune's Washington bureau



### **After the ice, first of two Dem forums in Iowa today**

Saturday, December 1, 2007

By Rick Pearson

DES MOINES—Democratic presidential contender John Edwards promised today to seek the elimination of mandatory minimum prison sentences and said the nation instead should create a new infrastructure for economic success in poor communities.

"How long does it take America to understand we can't build enough prisons to solve this problem," Edwards said of the high incarceration rates among the poor and minority population.

His comments came at the Heartland Presidential Forum in Des Moines' downtown HyVee Hall, an event for progressive grassroots political activists from Iowa and 31 other states, sponsored by the Center for Community Change and Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement.

The event was held despite a sweep of snow, sleet, ice and freezing rain that assaulted much of Iowa, including Des Moines, that led to a temporary shut down of the city's airport and made travel officially not-recommended.

With the calendar turn to December a reminder of how inhospitable the Iowa campaign season can become enroute to its Jan. 3 first-in-the-nation caucuses, Republican contender Mitt Romney canceled a day of appearances while former President Bill Clinton canceled a campaign stop on behalf of his wife, Sen. Hillary Clinton.

At the progressives' forum, Edwards said he wanted to create an "infrastructure for success" that included universal health care and increasing the minimum wage to \$9.50 an hour. For inmates,

Edwards said providing drug and alcohol counseling and rehabilitation, job training and education "was America's moral obligation if we believe in an equal and just America."

Edwards, who has campaigned on a populist theme against big business interests, agreed on the need to curb corporate farming and to fight corporations that threaten to destroy the environment and people's lives.

"How long are we going to let these people run the United States of America?" Edwards asked. "At the end of the day, the question is whether you believe we have a real fight on our hands. I believe we have an epic fight on our hands."

The former North Carolina senator's appearance was followed by Rep. Dennis Kucinich of Ohio who told the activists that he looked at the country "as a broad community of people who are waiting for leadership."

Kucinich, who has not shown much campaign activity in Iowa, said he was the only candidate for president seeking a government-run universal health care system. And, he said, instead of increasing the federal minimum wage, "we need a president who is willing to stand up for a federal living wage law, based on the cost of living."

Hillary Clinton, who took part in the forum by phone because of weather problems, used the event to pitch her universal health care proposal—though without attacking the plan proposed by her rival, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, in keeping with a mandate from organizers that the candidates refrain from attacking others.

"We have to have more cost effective and higher quality health care for everyone," the New York senator said. "We have to lower the cost so people can afford prevention as well as all ranges of health care services that we should be entitled to."

But Clinton drew some boos from the crowd with her answers on immigration, including a refusal to commit to seeking a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants within 100 days of taking office as president.

"As a president, comprehensive immigration reform will be a high priority for me," said Clinton, who said she backs a plan to protect the nation's borders and provide a path to legalization. But she added that it was also up to Congress to pass an immigration reform plan.

Sen. Christopher Dodd of Connecticut pledged to seek an immigration reform proposal within 100 days of office, including provisions to tighten borders and create a way toward citizenship.

"Absolutely, it has to be done and has to be a major priority," Dodd said, noting that much of the reform rhetoric has focused on "fear and hate."

Still, Dodd said if an immigration reform proposal is "seen as a pure amnesty program, it will have difficulty. You know that and I know that."

Obama , a former community organizer in Chicago and the last candidate to appear, also got the loudest and most sustained reception, particularly from several neighborhood groups who traveled to the event from Chicago.

**"This idea of community values is not a just a cause of a campaign for me, it is my life," Obama told the group, saying that he would take the same principles that were instilled in him as a community organizer to the White House.**

Obama acknowledged that he was designing a health-care coverage system from scratch, "I would probably move more in the direction of a single-payer plan." But, he said, that could not be done while still trying to make sure "everybody's got coverage as quickly as possible" under his health care coverage proposal.

The Illinois senator also said he would work to put pressure on banks and securitization firms to convert high adjustable rate mortgages to fixed-rate mortgages in the wake of the growing problems of foreclosures and the sub-prime loan market.

"Understand that part of the reason we got into this is we didn't have a government that was regulating these bodies in the first place," Obama said of the sub-prime lenders.

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## **Democrats hear stories of injustice at forum**

*People from Iowa and other states ask questions about immigration, factory farms and health insurance.*

December 2, 2007

By JENNIFER JACOBS, REGISTER STAFF WRITER

### **The people got more microphone time than the politicians.**

Five Democratic presidential candidates who spoke Saturday at the Heartland Presidential Forum in Des Moines could do little more than nod and listen as person after person - mostly out-of-state residents - shared emotional stories of perceived injustice.

And the audience of 3,600 did not hesitate to express emotion. As they listened to descriptions of loss of health insurance, the stench of a nearby factory farm, or a family split up by immigration officials, the crowd frequently yelled out: "That ain't right!" and booed.

Hillary Clinton, a U.S. senator from New York, felt the heat of their displeasure after Billy Lawless, a Chicago immigration rights organizer, asked her if she'd commit to giving undocumented workers a path to citizenship in her first 100 days as president.

Clinton, who spoke by telephone, said immigration reform is a top priority.

But Lawless pressed her, asking if she'd do it in the first 100 days.

Clinton said it's up to Congress to pass such reform, but as president she would do as much as possible.

The crowd booed, apparently upset that she wouldn't commit to a 100-days promise.

Chris Dodd, a U.S. senator from Connecticut, was the next candidate to get that question, and he quickly answered: "Absolutely, absolutely."

"One of the great sources of our wealth and strength of our country has been the diversity of our people," Dodd said. "We've never done anything worthwhile as a nation when we've done it out of fear and hate."

Saturday's crowd was hardly just caucus-eligible Iowans. People were bused in from Missouri,

Kansas, Illinois and Minnesota, and organizers said people from 33 states were represented as part of a kickoff to the Campaign for Community Values.

The forum was hosted by Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement and Campaign for Community Values, a movement that includes about 100 community organizations.

Only one Republican, businessman John Cox, responded to the invitation, but the hosts' lawyers advised against a solo member of one party because it would appear to be an endorsement.

Also in attendance were former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards, Illinois Sen. Barack Obama and Dennis Kucinich, a representative from Ohio.

Edwards listened to Virgene Martin of Bridgewater tell about 400 people banding together to fight a factory farm. They failed, and the hog operation is now located next to Martin's own family farm.

"What's happening is these big corporate farming operations, and big multinational corporations that are taking over farming in America ... We see what they're doing to destroy our land," Edwards said. "We see what they're doing to destroy our people and take away our assets."

Edwards, a former trial lawyer, said he beat them in the courtroom, "and I'll beat 'em again."

Irlanda Helgen of Marshalltown got teary-eyed telling Kucinich about a father of five whose wife left for work one day and never came back because of an immigration raid.

"There's no illegal human beings," Kucinich said in English and Spanish.

Kucinich gave a fiery answer about his plan to move the country away from reliance on coal. He talked about a "full-employment economy," where everyone has a job, as well as health care for all, and education for all, from age 3 through college.

And he got wild applause when he said: "We must give those who come to this country a path to legalization."

Emira Palacios of Wichita, Kan., told Dodd she came to the United States 22 years ago as an undocumented worker. She has spent more than \$15,000 during the process of becoming a citizen, and she and her 18-year-old son will vote for first time in the next election.

Dodd said the country has to "have secure borders, obviously."

Later, a moderator cut him off when his answer was over two minutes.

"I get more time here than I get at those debates, though, I can tell you that," Dodd said, chuckling.

Deidra Lewis of Massachusetts, addressing Obama, said her daughter woke up with a burning feeling in her eyes one day. Lewis had to cut back her work hours to deal with her daughter's rare eye disease. In January, she lost her health insurance.

But she enrolled in the State Children's Health Insurance Program, and the public program made the difference between a child going blind or keeping her eyesight.

"Can you look into Alexsiana's eyes and tell me don't all God's children deserve medical care?" she asked.

Obama said yes. Alexsiana crossed the stage to hug him. The audience couldn't hear what he whispered in her ear.

Obama vowed to have a plan in place for health insurance for all Americans by the end of his first term as president.

After a string of stories told by people from the Bronx, Cleveland, Mississippi, South Carolina and California, Debra Carr told Obama she is from Des Moines.

Obama immediately said: "I want you to caucus for me."

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# THE Nation.

## Heartland Forum Tackles the Real Issues

December 3, 2007

By CHRISTOPHER HAYES

There were no "gotcha" questions for the Democratic candidates at the Heartland Forum in Des Moines on Saturday. No Russertian dredging up of past quotes or Blitzerite insistence that the candidates choose between "security" and "human rights." In fact, while there were questions to the five candidates who participated, some pointed and specific, they made up less of the day than statements of principle and firsthand testimonials from community leaders from across the country. Nearly 5,000 people (including 3,000 Iowans) braved a storm in the Midwest to pack an auditorium in downtown Des Moines and listen. Family farmers spoke of their community being invaded by the stench and pollution of industrial hog farms. Immigrants spoke of round-ups and police paying visits to kindergartens to yank children out of class. Longtime urban homeowners talked about the foreclosures and bankruptcies piling up in their neighborhoods. "Some things aren't right and other things ain't right," said Barbara Anderson of the adjusted rate mortgages that had ensnared her Cleveland neighbors. "Predatory lending ain't right."

The five candidates who participated--Edwards, Kucinich, Dodd, Obama and Clinton via telephone--had just two minutes to answer each question. (After being cut off during a response Dodd flashed a momentary look of frustration before saying, "I've got more time here than I get in those debates.") It was an inversion of the way we normally think of campaign events, as opportunities for people to listen to the candidates. The Heartland Forum was first and foremost an opportunity for the candidates to listen to the people.

Getting a politician into a room and forcing him or her to listen is an organizing tactic that dates back to Saul Alinsky, the irascible, visionary University of Chicago criminologist who more or less invented community organizing half a century ago. Most of the people in the audience and on the crowded stage were members, leaders or affiliated with the kinds of local community-based organizations that are descendants of Alinsky's own Industrial Areas Foundation, but Alinsky himself was probably rolling over in his grave. That's because the very nature of the event deviated from his Alinsky-ite methodology in two pretty radical ways. First, community organizing has always had little interest in electoral politics, believing that the person holding elected office matters far less than how you pressure him or her. **And second, the Heartland Forum was, more than anything, an attempt to articulate an overarching worldview--dare it be said, an ideology--rooted in the bedrock principle of the common good. "This forum is about more**

**than just politics," said Barb Kolbach of Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, "more than about the next election. It's all about our community values. We share responsibility for each other, and we're stronger as a nation when we realize that we're in it together."**

Alinsky didn't have much patience for that kind of talk, preferring instead narrowly tailored demands and power-building based on self-interest over any grand ideological vision.

Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change, which co-sponsored the forum along with Common Cause and a number of Iowa progressive groups, is well aware that this represents a new direction. **"There has been, within the organizing field, a revolution," he told me a few days before the event. Rather than having "people at the bottom speaking from their narrow self-interest," the event and the Campaign for Community Values that it was kicking off, provide a chance for people to "reach out and say where we think the country should go."**

Sometimes the melding of approaches, the local community-based and the grand ideological vision, felt awkward. As candidates was called forth, they each were met with the same slightly kabuki-like recitation of the core values by forum moderators, and there were so many people on stage it was easy to lose focus. But during its best moments, the forum offered a glimpse of an alternate vision of how politics might work. As a rule the debates hosted by CNN and MSNBC home in on internal divisions within the Democratic caucus, and questioners attempt to pin candidates by forcing them to choose between constituency A and constituency B. Do you support merit pay for teachers? Answer yes and you piss off the teachers' unions; answer no and you might anger parents.

**Rather than a vision of politics as a tribal battle between different interest groups, the Heartland Forum offered one grounded in solidarity across different narrowly constructed identity groups: white, black, Latino, rural, urban, secular and religious. So it was Inez Killingsworth, an African-American woman from inner-city Cleveland, asking John Edwards about the havoc that corporate agriculture has wreaked on lowan family farms. After Mayte Rodriguez told her story of coming to the United States as a child and now being denied financial aid despite having graduated in the top ten of her class, she was followed by Larry Genter, a white Iowa farmer who explained the context of Rodriguez's journey north. "Her story is about common people coming into this country looking to better their lives," said Genter. "In truth, it is government policies that drive people from their homes and countries. I have talked to family farmers in Mexico. They told me that since NAFTA, cheap corn flooded their markets, drove down their price.... I believe that American farmers and Mexican farmers and farmers all over the world have common goals and common concerns. For the sake of our national soul, we've got to quit treating immigrants like common criminals." (The only booing of the entire day came a few**

**moments later, when Hillary Clinton hemmed and hawed when asked if she would prioritize getting immigration reform passed in her first 100 days.)**

There was, actually, one "gotcha" question designed to put the candidates on the hook. At the end of each session with the candidate, moderator Kathy Hughes asked if, yes or no, the candidate would agree to meet with a delegation. This part was pure Alinsky, who always tried to force an elected official to commit to the next meeting before ending the current one. "The last time we had a Democratic administration we got NAFTA and welfare reform," says Bhargava. "That was our reward. Looking ahead to a new Democratic administration, we want to put together an infrastructure from the left to push hard so that working people and people of color don't get totally shafted."

Every single candidate agreed to the meeting, most saying that they wouldn't have to wait a 100 days. "I'll go better than that," said Dennis Kucinich. "You can sleep in the Lincoln bedroom. It's your government, you can come on in."

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# San Francisco Chronicle

## **The new electoral stars**

Wednesday, December 5, 2007

By Manuel Pastor

This past Saturday, I had the archetypical experience of the modern age - I was asked to blog live at a presidential debate in Iowa (something that dramatically raised my stock with my tech-savvy children). The un-modern part came in the form of questions: not filtered through television commentators, not posted via YouTube and sorted by CNN, not planted by opposing camps laying traps. Instead, real people posed real questions about real issues - the sort of deep discussion about America's future that we imagine must have occurred in an earlier and simpler era.

It wasn't a gimmick but the Heartland Presidential Forum, an event sponsored by a range of community-based organizations from around the country that drew nearly 4,000 participants. Part of a new "Campaign for Community Values" and directly hosted by the Washington-based Center for Community Change and Iowa's own Citizens for Community Improvement, four Democratic candidates were there in person: Barack Obama, John Edwards, Chris Dodd and Dennis Kucinich. Hillary Clinton was slated to be there but instead tapped in by phone, having been delayed by the aftermath of the hostage situation affecting her campaign workers in New Hampshire. The Republicans were also invited but only one volunteered - and lawyers ruled that to include just him would amount to an illegal political endorsement.

But it wasn't really the candidates that mattered - it was the questioners. Erica Fernandez, a 17-year-old student from Ventura County, spoke eloquently of her community's struggle against the siting of a liquefied natural gas facility - and asked John Edwards to address questions of environmental justice (the first time I've heard the issue raised at the presidential level).

Patricia Divine Wilder, a small business owner from Walla Walla, Wash., spoke to Hillary Clinton, choking back her own tears (and ours) as she struggled through a story of a nephew whose recurrent neck pains went unaddressed because he lacked health insurance. When he finally broke down and saw a doctor, it turned out to be inoperable lung cancer. Clinton responded at length about the arcane details of her health care plan - and was then cut off for exceeding time limits so that she could hear from an undocumented immigrant student. Identified by first name only, she noted that she had graduated at the top of her high school class, is two years away from finishing a B.A. in education, and will never be able to teach. Following her, Larry Ginter, a white family farmer from Iowa, pleaded that "to save our national soul, we have to stop treating

immigrants like common criminals." Echoing the theme, Tam Tran from Los Angeles told Dennis Kucinich her tale: she and her family fled from Vietnam, were rescued by a German boat, and came to the United States when she was 6. Now the United States wants to deport her - to Germany - and agents have followed up by raiding her parents' mobile home two months ago.

**Chris Dodd drew Cary Martin, a young black hedge fund investment attorney from Chicago, who recounted a quintessential Horatio Alger story - she was homeless when young and is now solidly middle class - and then stood the tale on its head by arguing that she never would have achieved success without the support of friends, nonprofits and government. Matthew Russell, an organizer and farmer from Iowa, seconded the theme, arguing that "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" is a myth and that government has had a role in his life and that of others.**

And Barack Obama found himself floored by Dedra Lewis from Springfield, Mass. She recounted her shock when her 10-year-old daughter, Alexsiana, developed a sight-threatening eye condition - and her relief when the State Children's Health Insurance (SCHIP) program threatened by President Bush's veto pen had saved her when she lost her job and her private insurance. Alexsiana was there - she and Obama exchanged hugs and quiet words before he went on to outline his health care plan.

**It was moving public theater but it was more than that. For just a few hours, media speculation about the horse race was set aside in favor of a heartfelt conversation about the dilemmas affecting American families. For just a few hours, special interests gave way to "community values:" when a distressed immigrant is followed by an African American success story and then by an Iowa farmer - and they all argue each other's cases - the shrill tone of division is replaced a new recognition that we are all in this together. The challenge is to stretch this tone and tenor beyond the hours of the Heartland Forum itself. Like the election itself, this was a time-limited event. The organizations hosting the forum understand this - they are community groups whose bread and butter is the patient one-on-one relationship-building that builds movements, and they see elections as but a moment in a long process of social change. But moments count. And while Sunday brought a return to the focus on polls and politics - Obama up, Clinton down, Edwards sideways - seeing the focus shift from the vote to the voters as it did so dramatically this past Saturday suggests a new way to make the election season one that better features the real stars in this drama: the American people and their aspirations for a real conversation about our common future.**

*Manuel Pastor is professor of geography and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California, and a research fellow at the Center for Justice, Tolerance and Community at UC Santa Cruz.*

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# Columbia MISSOURIAN

## GRO members go to presidential forum

December 2, 2007 | 10:38 p.m. CST

BY REGAN MCTARSNEY

DES MOINES, Iowa — At 5 a.m. Saturday, members of Grass Roots Organizing loaded up on a bus headed for Iowa.

It was the weekend, early and in the freezing rain. But the group took it in stride. At least it wasn't snowing.

"We're blessed that this is not you-know-what," member Judith Frasher said.

A big yellow charter bus took 40 members of GRO on a seven-hour trip to Des Moines for the Heartland Presidential Forum.

The forum, sponsored by Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement and the Center for Community Change, was co-sponsored by GRO. The forum brought 5,000 members from grass-roots organizations from every region of the country to question five Democratic presidential candidates about the action they'd take concerning "community values" if elected.

Frasher is a social work associate at University Hospital and a former intern for GRO. Health care was a major issue on Frasher's mind on Saturday.

"I would like to know what, if anything, the candidates intend to do about the pharmaceuticals," Frasher said before the forum.

GRO was founded seven years ago and has been involved in reform and action in Columbia on the issues of Medicaid, food stamps, welfare and housing issues. The Heartland forum addressed health care, living wages, clean elections, fair housing, immigration reform, farming and the environment.

**"What we believe is that what you do to one person affects us all," GRO Executive Director Robin Acree said. "Let's really do something and create an America where we take care of one another and know that when one does better, we all do better."**

For the long bus ride to Des Moines the Columbia bus caravanned with the GRO bus from Mexico. The members chatted in the bathroom lines at gas stations along the way. The tight-knit community braved sleet and a rainstorm together, and roll call on the Columbia bus was more like a shout-out to the friends they know than an official reading of names.

"What you see is people grow," Laura Parker, one of GRO's founders, said. "They see that they can make a difference, that their voices can be heard."

Though Parker has gotten busier in the past seven years, she likes to get involved when she can.

"I like the company of these people. These are people who still believe in America," Parker said.

"It energizes your soul. It's empowering."

GRO works to protect social-justice issues without a consensus party affiliation.

"We protest Democrats as well as Republicans," Parker said. "We're issue-based."

The forum coordinators invited every presidential hopeful to the forum with a time limit for signing up. Five Democratic candidates responded to the invitation on time: Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y.; Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn.; former Sen. John Edwards, D-S.C.; Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio; and Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill.

Forum coordinators said only one Republican candidate responded, but they dropped him, saying they didn't want to convey that they were only supporting that candidate.

"I'm just here to get a feel for where the candidates stand on the issue of poverty and what they'd change if elected," Parker said.

After the drive came a walk through melting snow and sleet rain to Hy-Vee Hall where GRO saw some familiar faces among the grass-roots crowd, some coming from as far as away as New York and California.

"GRO has a national reputation for the work that we do," Parker said. "It was kind of exciting just to see the candidates in person and exciting to know there are grass-roots organizations across the country willing to come together."

GRO helped plan the forum in advance, working with groups in Iowa and Illinois to unite the grass-roots organizations, including the Center for Community Change. Acree would have gone early to set up but wanted to ride with everyone else.

Many groups had a representative on stage to ask the candidates questions. GRO's representative was Lynette Nickelberry, a graduate student at MU who was in Des Moines for the event Thursday through Sunday.

"She made a big sacrifice, and that's a big community value right there," Acree said.

Nickelberry had a prominent role at the beginning of the event when she called out the names of various grass-roots groups in attendance. She did not get to ask one of the candidates a question, but she did get to sit on stage with more than 30 other representatives during the forum.

The forum was classified as more of a conversation than a debate. The candidates were asked not to rebuff previous candidates when it was their turn to take the stage.

The forum coordinators said that Clinton did not attend because of the hostage crisis at her Rochester, N.H., campaign office. She did, however, phone in and answer in the same format as the other candidates.

Each candidate was given the opportunity to discuss two important election issues. When the candidates got on stage, they listened to one personal story and answered two questions about that issue. They were given two minutes to answer each question.

Each candidate heard two stories, some about health care and others about immigration and corporate takeovers. The candidates said the stories were all too common across America.

Frasher remembered one powerful story a woman told about her nephew giving up his personal health insurance in order to provide for his wife and two children. The nephew avoided going to the doctor even though he had horrible back and neck pain, but he eventually gave in and sought treatment. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and — the woman broke into tears when finishing the story — died six weeks later.

Frasher said the forum's format forced the candidates to deal with the health-care issue and look in the eyes of those affected by adversity.

"They can't deny it; her nephew's already dead," Frasher said.

After the candidates answered all four questions, each was asked if he or she would meet with community-values groups within the first 100 days of being elected.

Obama said yes, Kucinich offered to let them sleep in the Lincoln bedroom, and Edwards and Dodd said they'd meet with them in the first week. Hillary's less enthusiastic "yes" was met with booing from the crowd when she pointed out that anything she wanted to do would have to be passed by the Senate, this after they had booed her response to an immigration question.

"I was shocked to hear that reaction — that booing — in response to anything Hillary said," Frasher said. "I've been led to believe by the media and TV reports that Hillary was the front-runner."

The forum ended with a call for grass-roots unity. The message was just what Mayor Douglas Palmer of Trenton, N.J., learned from his "High School Musical"-watching daughter: "We're all in this together."

After the forum, GRO waited for the bus home. Acree took the opportunity to fire them up.

"We're gonna take this back to the streets, and we're gonna get things done by people and for people," Acree said enthusiastically.

After the forum, all 108 GRO members ate together at Old Country Buffet, where they tipped the waitress more than \$100. She said she'd use the money to buy a Christmas tree.

Discussion on the bus turned to the candidates and on who left the most distinct impression that day.

"I think Edwards would resonate with Midwestern voters," Frasher said. "There's some candidates out there that I don't think can relate to Judy Frasher's life."

On the long drive back to Columbia, GRO was even more motivated to take action in Missouri.

"It does make you feel like you can go home and do things again," Acree said.

With February's primary nearing, GRO is going to continue its community-voting work. They are also planning to push for health-care reform.

"I think it was worth the danger of riding through the ice storm," Frasher said.

*Michelle Nealy is a reporter for Diverse: Issues In Higher Education. Associated Press contributed to this article.*

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