

What's the First Lady's New Public-Awareness Campaign All About? And Could It Work?



Michelle Obama announced a public-awareness campaign to encourage students to pursue a college education. A strong mix of partners like Lumina and Vine bodes well for the effort, but in a crowded media landscape it faces plenty of competition for students' attention.

By Beckie Supiano OCTOBER 19, 2015

Michelle Obama on Monday unveiled a new element of her work to [encourage](#) young people to pursue education beyond high school: a public-awareness campaign called "[Better Make Room.](#)"

The campaign, which rolled out with a diverse list of partners including the Lumina Foundation, Mashable, and Funny or Die, has a website, a [hashtag](#), and a [video](#) in the style of a public-service announcement. Users can also [sign up](#) for college-related text-message reminders.

Better Make Room, part of Ms. Obama's Reach Higher initiative, will "leverage traditional and new-media platforms to celebrate student stories in the same way that we often celebrate celebrities and athletes," according to a White House fact sheet. The goals are to "celebrate education, change the national conversation, and reach students directly where they are, and give them a space to create content while also navigating the college-going process."

What message, exactly, is the first lady trying to send to young people? And how effectively might this campaign convey it?

To get some early answers, *The Chronicle* asked a small group of experts — none of whom were involved in developing the campaign — to take a quick look at the Better Make Room website and share their first impressions. They are:

Ben Castleman, an assistant professor of education and public policy at the University of Virginia and author of *The 160-Character Solution*.

Alissa Fishbane, a managing director of ideas42, a nonprofit group "using behavioral economics to do good."

Bill Goodwill, chief strategist of Goodwill Communications, which distributes and promotes public-service advertising.

Scott Talan, an assistant professor of communication at American University.

We separately asked each expert the same questions. Their responses have been edited for clarity and condensed.

What do you see as the main message of "Better Make Room"?

Mr. Talan: How people can better help themselves.

Mr. Castleman: Students should believe in their own potential, their own capacity for success, and know that there are other students out there who've gone through similar challenges, who've managed to get to and succeed in college, and that there are resources and supports available.

Who do you think is its intended audience?

Ms. Fishbane: I can speculate based on Reach Higher that ideally it would be every student out there.

Mr. Goodwill: It looks like it's the 14-to-19-year-old audience, and I suppose that is the most appropriate audience because that's when kids really start planning their post-high-school activities. But I think it really starts much, much earlier than that, and that could be one of the deficiencies of the campaign.

How well do you think the website articulates the campaign's message?

Mr. Goodwill: From what I can gather it looks to be very, very well designed, and of course they have some really high-powered partners behind them, and that's really important.

Mr. Castleman: What struck me in viewing the site, it has a very positive social norm that you're one of many people from a diverse array of backgrounds who are going to college, so you should not feel alone. I hope that, as more and more students post their own stories, new students to the site will see the kind of diversity of spirit, the type of adversity other students have overcome, and find that very affirming.

What about the campaign looks promising?

Mr. Castleman: It is very clearly oriented toward directly engaging young people — everything from the partners they've brought on board to the interface. It seems self-evident, but I actually think it's an important area of growth from the prior federal efforts to promote college access, which put a lot of effort into developing tools and in providing resources but not nearly as much on engagement.

Ms. Fishbane: One thing is cues about the type of person who goes to college, and whether you will fit in. One of the things that will be really important, if you're trying to reach people who are generally underrepresented in higher education, how do you show that "people like me" are going? College is hard for everyone, right? There's tough classes, there's a lot going on, you're on your own, you have to manage as an adult for the first time. If you feel like you belong and you're the type of person who goes, you'll be like, "College is hard, but it's just hard." If you're the type of person where you look around and wonder, "Do I belong?" and it's hard, you look at it differently: "It's hard, and maybe I don't belong here."

What about the campaign looks problematic?

Mr. Talan: I would say it's more general. Getting attention in an increasingly cluttered, complicated communication ecosystem is not easy — especially with something that has no existing brand name, or sponsor, or identifiable logo. It's all new. I don't know what else they're doing besides the website, I don't know their marketing plan or strategic outreach other than what they have here.

They have some good partners, and if those partners actually do stuff, then maybe. So *Seventeen*, Vine, NBC Universal — great media mix there — but then, what are they doing?

Mr. Goodwill: Mass media is still very, very strong in reaching all different kinds of audiences. What I've seen from the site so far is this is strictly an online initiative. We certainly know from our previous experience there are other ways to reach folks, like Channel One [the student-news network piped into schools across the country]. We've also placed PSAs [public-service announcements] in Jumbotron in sports venues, and we've done posters which can be placed in and around schools. So there are some other mass-media techniques that I think they ought to explore, and it does not appear they've done so so far.

How would you improve it?

Mr. Goodwill: The group that they're overlooking that has a lot of influence on young kids and their future educational pursuits are adults, namely, parents, teachers, and guidance counselors. The word we use when we talk about these folks is "adult influencers." I mean, kids are not making these decisions in a void. To aim a campaign strictly at the target audience without thinking about this other influence is a big mistake. I wouldn't do it that way, let's put it that way.

How effective would you expect this campaign to be?

Mr. Talan: To know how effective, we'd have to know what their goals are and then have access to the analytics. I think they have a better chance for success than failure, because of the idea and how they've communicated that idea, and then who they're partnering with.

Mr. Goodwill: Anything coming out of the White House creates a lot of buzz.

Mr. Castleman: Students are [saturated](#) with so much information, so many opportunities to engage socially. Is this going to be something, well designed and informed as it is, that captivates students? I think that is an open question.

I am optimistic that this could be a valuable resource, and, as important, a sense of affirmation and social-emotional support for students to recognize that they're really not alone. There's a lot of people who believe in them, who want them to succeed, and who see their potential. My hope is that that kind of messaging may really turn out to be as important as the more informational value of telling people about Fafsas and college applications.

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