

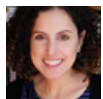
Interviews with Influencers: Hilary Shelton



Interviews *with* **INFLUENCERS**

HILARY O.
SHELTON

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Bureau, and Senior Vice President
for Advocacy and Policy*



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It's easy to mistake Hilary O. Shelton's office for a museum. Nearly every surface is covered with artifacts and awards that together tell the story of his impressive career as an advocate for a variety of public policy issues. Mr. Shelton currently serves as the Director to the NAACP's Washington Bureau, where he's also the Senior Vice President for Advocacy and Policy. Prior to his work at the NAACP, Mr. Shelton was the Federal Liaison/Assistant Director to the Government Affairs Department of the United Negro College Fund. He serves on a number of national boards of directors, including the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and the Congressional Black Caucus Institute, and has received far too many awards and recognitions to list here. Suffice it to say we were honored to sit down with him for our final interview of 2019.

Q: We know the number one reason students go to college is to get a job so they can have a stable and secure life—a part of which is making sure students can reasonably pay off any debts they incurred while attending school. But

based on a joint report the NAACP co-authored with the Center for Responsible Lending, student loan debt is even more unsustainable for borrowers of color. Why did you decide to undertake this research? And what did you learn that you hope policymakers will consider in their efforts towards improving the quality of our higher- ed system?

A: Trying to cross the finish line of a college education has sadly become one of the toughest things anyone can do. And if you come from a family that was fortunate enough to have breadwinners that could put money away for college for you, the issue is not whether you can pay for it, the only issue is whether you have what it takes to pass the tests and get through. Financial resources and stability make a huge difference.

As you know, we have a number of need-based financial aid programs like Pell Grants and other federal grants that are driven, again, by family income. Then we have programs like loans that are also there to help make up the difference. I started college in 1976, and Pell Grants came around in the late 1960s. I come from a family of seven kids, working-class dad with multiple jobs, and my mom stayed home and took care of all of us. Paying for seven kids to go to college was no doubt an expensive endeavor, but there was a saying in my household: “You’re mandated to go to elementary school, and you are mandated to go to high school until you’re 18. But you’re a Shelton, so you’re mandated to go to college too.”

When I went to Howard University, my Pell Grant paid *all* of my tuition. I took out loans to cover other college-related costs. My Pell Grant paid all of my tuition for two semesters every year, I had to take out student loans paid for room and board, the meal plan, transportation, books, and everything else beyond tuition itself.

But things have changed in the last few decades. There’s a lot of speculation that you’ll walk across the stage with a degree in hand that will help you get a job, and be able to pay off the debt you’ve incurred trying to get to that point. What we realize is that’s becoming harder and harder to accomplish this goal and more students were falling into a debt-trap and unable to pay down their loans.

We worked with our friends at the [Center for Responsible Lending](#) to develop a [report](#) that looks at the issues of financial aid, student loans, and debt, specifically for African American and other racial and ethnic minority students. We determined that about 75% of all African American college students are at an income level that makes them eligible to receive the maximum financial package available, and 90% of African Americans college students are low-income enough to receive some level of need-based financial aid.

Those findings made us realize we needed to take on this issue, in addition to the other policy priorities the NAACP focuses on. There was no excuse for it. And the job's not done. We're just

getting started talking about the issues borrowers of color face. Part of the fix on a federal level is making sure we have better control and regulation over student loans. And ensuring we have more grants and other resources available to pay for higher ed so students don't have to worry about the debt-trap while paying their student loans back.

(We also talked at length about what relieving the burden of debt can do for a family. And if you're not familiar with what happened at Morehouse College's commencement in May of 2019, [read this!](#))

Q: If you had a magic wand, what's one change you'd make to our nation's higher education system to improve access and equity for all students?

A: If I had a magic wand, I hope it would level the playing field in higher ed with just one swipe.

It kind of depends on where you point it. But I hope the magic wand would provide the support young people and non-traditional students need to succeed and get to and through college. One of the things I don't think we do enough of, in the best kind of way in our public schools, is just planning for future success. We plan for a struggle. We plan for competition, but we're not really planning for the success of our young people. Part of planning for success is also preparing students at every stage for what comes next in the higher education process.

Sadly, when I was growing up, our public education system deployed a process similar to a "weed and seed" approach. If your grades weren't good, you were weeded out with little focus putting all students on the path for success. I was fortunate enough to have the support I did at home and school, but a lot of kids I knew didn't have that.

The Federal TRIO Program does a great job of addressing these support gaps for students. I hope the program continues and grows, but we've also got to start digging deeper and work to bring more ESEA schools into compliance, and provide more resources to the most underserved communities, so that all students are set-up for success.

We want to make sure every child has the resources to go to school. We want to make sure they have the opportunity to go wherever their minds and their hearts take them. And that when they finish their degrees, they're better off than when they started, and don't find themselves in a debt-trap with or without a degree.

Q: Who are your influencers - in education and beyond?

Oh boy. Let's see. My parents for sure. I was the third of seven kids. My father's degree was in engineering, though for various racial issues, he was not able to truly work as an engineer. My mother's undergraduate degree was in home economics, with a minor in child psychology – so you can imagine how well-run our household was when we were growing up!

I've also had the opportunity to meet some incredible people in my life, including Dorothy Height (revolutionary leader of the civil rights movement), and Andrew Young (American politician, diplomat, and activist), Congressman Bobby Scott (VA), Congresswoman Maxine Waters (CA), and so many other amazing people. I've got a lot of "heroes" and "sheroes." If you asked me to make a list of all the lessons I've learned from people I admire, we'd be here for a few more hours.

And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention my wife, Paula Jean Young Shelton. We've been married for 30 years. It's incredible to be so inspired and influenced by someone in such a positive way. So I've got to give an awful lot of credit to her and our family.

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