Regional

What Democrats have planned for higher education

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Letters from Academia

The Democrats have made a number of concrete promises regarding higher education if they win the presidential elections. They promise concerted actions against sexual assaults on campuses that include comprehensive support for survivors, fair judicial processes that prevent the use of cultural biases against females as "inciters," and increased prevention efforts through education programs.

The Clinton campaign also promises support for net neutrality, the idea that Internet service providers should enable access to all content and applications regardless of the source without favoring or blocking particular products or websites. The Democratic plan also proposes expanding availability of fiber-optic broadband Internet to all academic and research libraries.

Democrats also promise reform of the immigration system, including awarding green cards (permanent residency status) to students with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) degrees and creating a start-up visa program for foreign entrepreneurs.

They also endorse updating the copyright system, opening licensing of research funded by the federal government. This will open access to all publications in very expensive scholarly journal articles that were funded, even in part, by the federal government. This proposal will help to reduce the spiraling cost of academic libraries.

Her running mate, Sen. Tim Kaine from Virginia, pushed measures to reduce the cost of attending college while governor of his state. He supported major construction initiatives for public colleges, sided with the very popular president of the University of Virginia, Teresa Sullivan, when some of the school's board members tried to oust her without cause and pushed forward a number of initiatives to fund higher education in his state though the use of bonds. He also showed great sensitivity after the Virginia Tech massacre of 2007, which resulted in 33 deaths (including the perpetrator) as a result of gun violence. He signed legislation that allows public and private colleges to request information about students' past behavior that could indicate mental illness issues.

Clinton has also promised to take executive action to offer a three-month moratorium on federal student-loan payments. Under the proposal, borrowers would be given resources to help them save money on their loans and to sign up for the correct income-based repayment plans during the moratorium. According to her campaign, "This proposal, when implemented, will revolutionize the funding of higher education in America, improve the economic future of our country, and make life immediately better for tens of millions of people stuck with high levels of student debt." Clinton has also said she would allow graduates who enter public-service fields to refinance their student loans.

The Clinton initiative that might have the most impact on colleges is one to eliminate public college tuition for families with incomes under $125,000. According to a study by Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, this initiative will spur enrollment of thousands of students who are now deterred by the price of college. On the other hand, this will impact many private colleges' enrollments, leading to the potential reduction in ethnic and socioeconomic diversity among private institutions. This proposal is important because price and geography are much more important than other factors – including rankings – that influence decisions by students and their families about where to enroll. Projections are that this plan would boost higher enrollment at state universities of between nine and 22 percent, meaning an average of 2.5 million new enrollees. This increase at state universities would mean that enrollment in private colleges would drop by as much as 31 percent. However, the most selective of the private ones may not be affected that much because they tend to attract well-to-do students and have very generous financial assistance programs.

The idea of making public higher education free or almost free was not Clinton's original idea, but one that was adopted from the Bernie Sanders campaign. This proposal would place the U.S. on par with many other developed and even developing countries where higher education tuition is free, or is adjusted to students' ability to pay. While this plan may sound like good news, especially given that the current combined college debt is more than a trillion dollars, we should be careful of what we wish.

Public institutions of higher education in this country have seen their funding deteriorate for many years. As a consequence, they lack the ability to suddenly absorb a large influx of students because of lack of facilities or because of facilities that are in desperate need of repair.

Also because of that lack of funding they have relied more and more on adjuncts and part-time faculty that generally cannot provide the same level of quality education, who are less engaged in campus matters and who do not contribute to graduate education.

They also bring in no money through grants since they are not expected to conduct research and other scholarly or service activities.

Furthermore, what is not clear is what is going to happen to tuition at many public institutions because state budget cuts have forced them to rely more and more on tuition money. How the federal government will compensate them for this lack of revenue is unclear. In fact, some predict that these schools will have to increase tuition and fees on more well-to-do students to compensate for the overall loss of revenue.

In any case these plans rely on the states taking action on their financial responsibility toward public education. Given the past history of similar programs, such as "Obamacare," many state legislatures and governorships controlled by Republicans may block those efforts for purely partisan reasons.

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