

Clinton, Trump, and Higher Ed: Where Washington Goes

As Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump vie for the presidency, we take a look at their stands on higher education—and at how federal education policy might play out after the election.

By Stephen G. Pelletier

Advancing quality education is an evergreen plank for presidential contenders. George H.W. Bush campaigned to be “The Education President.”

Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama made education a pillar of their successful campaigns.

In 2016, though, education is taking a bit of a back seat. While Hillary Clinton has talked a fair amount about higher education, that issue has been overshadowed this year by discussions about national security, law and order, immigration policy, and the domestic economy. On the other side of the aisle, while the official Republican party platform addresses specific aspects of higher education, Donald Trump’s campaign has relatively little to say on that topic.

Approaching the presidential election of 2016, we thought it would be interesting to take a deeper look at what both Clinton and Trump have to say about higher education—and to speculate about how related policy might change after the election. (One important caveat: As we write this analysis in the summer of 2016, just after the Democratic National Convention, we know that much can change in the months ahead. That seems especially true in this unusual election year. Caveat emptor.)

Where Clinton Stands

After fighting with Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primaries over “free college” and student debt, Hilary Clinton shifted closer to versions of his positions just before the Democratic convention—a “revamping” that some analysts ascribed to Clinton’s interest in wooing Sanders’ supporters.

With a nod toward Sanders, Clinton tweaked proposals she had announced earlier under a program called the “New College Compact.” In its revised version, Clinton pledged that “every student should be able to graduate from a public college or university in their state without taking on any student debt.” Students from families making \$85,000 a year or less would be able to go to a four-year public college or university tuition-free. That threshold would rise to \$125,000 by 2021. Under the plan, community college would be tuition-free for all working families.

Clinton’s revised position would also let students refinance their college loans. Her plan promises options for “income-based repayment” of student loans based on the principles that “nobody should have to pay more than 10 percent of monthly income” in loans and that college debt should be forgiven after 20 years, or after 10 years if a borrower “works



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in the public interest.” Clinton would create channels for students to pay loans via payroll deductions and promised to “explore further options to encourage employers to help pay down student debt.” Aspiring entrepreneurs would be able to defer loan payments. Clinton would create an immediate three-month moratorium on payments for federal student loans, during which borrowers would get targeted resources to help them save money on their loans and federal authorities would “crack down on for-profit colleges and loan servicers who have too often taken advantage of borrowers.”

The New College Compact would restore year-round Pell grants and would make “major” investments in Historically Black and Minority-Serving Institutions. The plan would simplify

the FAFSA and provide early notifications about Pell eligibility. It would make grants to universities “that invest in student support, quality child care, partnerships with early childhood providers, emergency financial aid, and other interventions proven to boost completion, especially for low-income and first-generation students.”

The Clinton plan would build on current federal experiments to allow federal student aid to be used for career and lifelong learning programs, including online education and programs leading to badges, certificates and nanodegrees.

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Under Clinton's plan, colleges and universities would be held accountable for containing costs, improving student completion rates and learning outcomes, and doing more to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The plan would leverage Title IV funds to give "low-cost, technology-enabled programs" better access to accreditation, albeit with rigorous evaluation of student outcomes and provider integrity and zero tolerance for "programs that fall short." Clinton would reward innovative colleges and target those that defraud taxpayers thorough abuse of federal loans.

Clinton says her plan would cost \$350 billion over 10 years—paid for "by closing tax loopholes and expenditures for the most fortunate." Half the plan's cost would fund grants to states and colleges, a third would relieve interest on student debt, and the balance would support innovation in higher education.

"Secretary Clinton has put forward a wideranging, expansive suite of programs designed to increase the federal government's role in financing higher education," says Terry W. Hartle, senior vice president at the American Council on Education. "Such policies are not cheap and they would not come without a significant increase in federal regulation of colleges and universities." The College Compact, he says, is "an effort to force states to play their historic role in funding public higher education." Hartle characterizes Clinton's ideas as representing "a significant departure in federal policy" both because they "move away from student aid and in the direction of institutional aid," and because they would exclude private colleges when, historically, federal aid to higher education has been sector-neutral.

Trump's Ideas

In contrast to Clinton's proposals, Donald Trump has said nearly nothing about his plans for higher education. As of late July 2016, the only mention of education on the official Trump website was a call for an end to Common Core, a state rather than federal issue. Trump said relatively little about higher education in the primary campaign, although in one speech in 2015 he said he was in favor of paring back the size and scope of the Education Department, perennially a favored position among Republicans. Frederick Hess, who directs education policy studies at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute (AEI), told the *Hechinger Report* that "I don't think [Trump] has thought deeply or long about education policy."

A search in the national press for insights or, indeed, for any scrap of detail about Trump's positions on higher education quickly leads back to a single source: a widely cited interview in *Inside Higher Education* with Sam Clovis, an economics professor at private Morningside College in Iowa and a former talk show host who is described as national co-chair and policy director of the Trump campaign.

Clovis told *Inside Higher Education* that the Trump campaign expected higher education "to be a major issue." He said Trump would fight against free or debt-free college. Clovis said Trump was interested in again privatizing the student loan system, with provisions that would require institutions to share responsibilities for student debt. The news site reported that Clovis said Trump wants to see decisions about student loans contingent on "students'

prospective majors and their likely earnings after graduation." Clovis said the Trump campaign was studying what kinds of improvements should be made in for-profit higher education. (Trump's own foray into that world, Trump University, has come under heavy criticism, with some experts castigating the



school for charging high tuition while under-delivering quality educational outcomes.) While Clovis provided hints about a Trump higher education platform, the exact parameters of those policies had yet to be announced as of early August.

The official platform adopted

at the Republican convention touched only briefly on higher education. It said universities “must not infringe on... freedom of speech...in the name of political correctness,” contended that the federal government should not originate student loans, called for “new systems of learning to compete with traditional four-year schools,” and argued for accreditation to be decoupled from federal financing of higher education. Given Donald Trump’s independence, it seems unlikely that he would necessarily follow those official stands, unless of course they conform with his own thinking. (The Democratic Party’s platform, meanwhile, was largely in step with Clinton’s positions on higher education.)

Assessing the Positions

Pundits offer varied perspectives on the different proposals. Amy Laitinen, director for higher education at the progressive think tank New America and a past policy advisor at the Department of Education and the White House, chides Trump for wanting to privatize student lending. Especially in a time of constrained resources, she says, “to basically bring back giveaways to the banks at the expense of students seems like crazy policymaking.”

Laitinen says Clinton’s push for more affordable college “is the right impulse.” At the same time, though, she criticizes Clinton’s emphasis on enabling students to refinance their loans. That solution, she says, would be expensive to fund, would return relatively few extra dollars

to borrowers’ wallets and, overall, “would do very little to actually deal with college costs.” It would be better, she argues, to consider applying that money to help nontraditional students, for example, or perhaps to reward “schools that are really good at helping Pell students graduate.”

Writing in *Forbes*, Andrew Kelly, a resident scholar and founding director of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the AEI, said Clinton’s ideas for student loan reform “run from the puzzling (the three month moratorium) to the regressive (loan refinancing).” Concerning proposals for “free” college, Kelly wrote, “It is not clear to me that the federal government has a compelling interest in zeroing out tuition at state institutions for families that are able to shoulder some of the cost.”

Before the gavel had closed the Democratic convention, prognosticators were already speculating about the potential downstream impact of Clinton’s education policies. (Putting aside, for a moment, the reality that her big ideas will likely have trouble finding traction in a recalcitrant Congress.) One concern is that “free” college, subsidized by the federal government, might incent colleges to increase tuition. There’s speculation that subsidized tuition in the public sector might cannibalize students from private colleges, many of which are already suffering pinched enrollments, and force some to close. There’s also fear that Clinton’s proposals, if enacted, might create more demand for public education than public universities can efficiently handle.

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Looking Toward 2017

Regardless of which presidential candidate ultimately gets the chance to try to convert ideas to legislation, the viability of their respective proposals needs to be weighed in the context of what the next Congress might look like. If the Senate turns Democratic, for example, might that mean that Congress will actually take up its overdue reauthorization of the Higher Education Act? Barmak Nassirian, AASCU's director of federal relations and policy analysis, doesn't think that's in the cards. In the near future, he says, "Chambers may change hands, new committee chairs might come in with their own visions and hold hearings and write laws, but I don't think you're actually going to see reauthorization." Nassirian says that any major change for higher education would be more likely to occur through budget bills, including reconciliation of the entire U.S. budget. Apart from funding questions, Nassirian says that individual members of Congress are likely to continue to show general interest in college costs, outcomes and accreditation. Specific issues like campus sexual assault and free speech may also come to the fore.

Nassirian says AASCU's central policy priority remains stopping the privatization of public higher education, and ensuring the vitality of public universities as "a mechanism of access and opportunity and a gateway to entering the middle class." A key task, he says, is to "reconceptualize the relationship between the federal government and the states," so that states continue to support public colleges and universities. "I think we're at a tipping point where without decisive rearrangement of federal incentives,

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the states may well decide [college] is just a private benefit that they take no responsibility for," Nassirian says. If that comes to pass, he fears, "we will end up with the worst of all possibilities, political control of higher education without any funding responsibilities."

While much remains to be seen about how higher education policy plays out post-election, it is fair to say that legislative advances will likely be tempered by continued gridlock in Washington. Noting that "the level of partisanship that we're seeing now is far greater than anything we have seen in our lifetimes," Hartle says that profound questions are in play. "We'd like to imagine the Federal government as a system of checks and balances that prevents either the executive or the legislative branch from abusing their powers, but that really only works if the politics is practiced between the 40yard lines, if people are generally pursuing the political process the way they have," Hartle says. "Those norms have begun to disintegrate." As a consequence, he says, a looming question

is "whether the norms that have governed American politics for the last 50 years will continue to be a factor going forward."

These larger concerns may supersede the impact of whoever wins the White House. "The political process has been failing for some time, and I don't think the dynamics are such that it is likely to improve as a result of the election," Hartle says. "I don't think the Republicans on Capitol Hill are likely to be terribly accepting of a Hillary Clinton presidency, and it's not clear who on Capitol Hill would be terribly enthusiastic about a Donald Trump presidency."

In the end, Hartle says, "it's very hard to imagine the broader political environment changing significantly from what we are seeing now. And I think as long as we're in this highly partisan, contentious, gridlocked political environment, the likelihood that we'll see significant changes in public policy in any area are relatively modest." **P**

Based in Rockville, Md., Stephen G. Pelletier writes regularly about higher education.

