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## U.S. House candidates differ on higher ed policy

BY [ADAM B SULLIVAN](#) | OCTOBER 27, 2010 7:15 AM

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Both major candidates in this year's 2nd Congressional District race grew up poor and eventually became doctors — one an M.D. and one a Ph.D. Both say higher education was the key to their ascension.

But U.S. Rep Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa, and Republican challenger Mariannette Miller-Meeks offer very different plans for supporting higher education. Loebsack has vowed not to cut higher-education funding, while Miller-Meeks stressed making postsecondary education more affordable.

Neither candidate has made higher education a central tenet of her or his campaign, preferring to focus on issues such as health-care reform and the stimulus. Loebsack has stood by his vote in favor of both of those measures, while Miller-Meeks has said she would like to repeal the health-care bill and has criticized the stimulus.

Still, higher education is an issue both are considering, because of the billions of dollars the federal government allocates to it.

Higher education is largely funded by states, but most students rely on federal assistance to pay tuition. The U.S. Department of Education will disburse about \$135 billion in direct loans next fiscal year. That's in addition to almost \$1 billion in work-study funding and \$757 million in supplemental grants.

Loebsack says he won't touch that money, even as the push to trim the federal deficit grows.

"I don't think any of that should be on the chopping block," Loebsack said in an interview with The Daily Iowan. "Education is a key for so many people, not just getting out of poverty but moving forward. Education is not just an equalizer, but it's necessary in the job market."

Miller-Meeks didn't commit to protecting federal higher-education funding and instead stressed the federal government needs to do more to bring down college costs.

"Regardless of the accessibility of student loans, the real problem is the cost," she said. "Nothing is being done about the cost of tuition and the costs that students pay."

The Republican said federal policy should focus on preparing students for college so they don't have to pay for remedial coursework in college. She also stressed the role of postsecondary schools besides four-year universities.

Chet Rzonca, the University of Iowa dean of continuing education, said starting at an affordable college and then pursuing a baccalaureate at a four-year school is often beneficial.

"If you control for backgrounds like family income, there's no difference in outcomes when students come from community colleges," he said.

Both Loebsack and Miller-Meeks said they're wary of the federal government imposing regulations on higher education — one of the most well-preserved bastions of state control.

"Any time the federal government becomes involved in funding for education on any level, it then imposes mandates, and it has strings attached to any money," Miller-Meeks said.

But Loebsack says Miller-Meeks' plan to make college more affordable "walks a fine line."

"It is not the federal government's function to determine tuition," he said. "It is not the function to determine what happens at these institutions."

Some others say making college more affordable and trimming federal education funding are linked.

"If you decrease student aid, you'll see a slowing down of tuition increases or a reversal of tuition increases," said Neal McCluskey, an associate director of the Center for Education Freedom. "As they get less money out of students because they don't have as much, then they'll have to prioritize and become more efficient."

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