

The Detroit News

Jacques: High cost of Dems' free stuff

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July 13, 2016

If you thought President Barack Obama was a big spender, he's starting to look downright thrifty when it comes to higher education.

Don't get me wrong. He's proposed expensive programs, such as a \$60 billion "free" community college plan. And Obama's meddled with student loans, placing more of that burden on taxpayers. Compared with what Hillary Clinton now wants, however, Obama's higher ed wish list looks like chump change.

Clinton initially proposed a \$350 billion plan to make college debt-free for students attending public universities. Her New College Compact promised the university experience to students without having to burden them or their families with taking out loans. Yet she expected families who could afford college to contribute.

Clinton threw that requirement out last week, when she broadly expanded her college proposal. Not only was it a diversion to the scathing comments FBI Director James Comey had for her mishandling of classified information. It was also a clear attempt to win Democratic presidential contender Bernie Sanders' support. It worked. Sanders, who wants free tuition for everyone, endorsed her Tuesday.

"I do think it was interesting she chose to go in this direction now," says Andrew Kelly, director of the Center on Higher Education Reform at the American Enterprise Institute. He notes that candidates tend to have more extreme positions during the primary, then tack toward the middle.

Clinton's also making a pitch to win over the young people who jumped on the Bernie bandwagon but haven't been keen to support her. Free stuff is cool, right?

As anyone who pays taxes knows, Clinton's plan isn't free at all. Prior to getting on board with Sanders' college ideas, Clinton had made fun of the expense of such a government handout.

She's OK with it now. Clinton did limit free tuition to families with incomes up to \$125,000. That will still make college "free" for roughly 80 percent of students.

According to Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, Clinton's plan has several big problems, in addition to the cost.

"It kills competition, and will eliminate private schools," he says.

By emulating a European model of higher ed, the U.S. would move away from a system that has made its universities the most envied in the world. They gained that reputation through having autonomy and competition. If the federal government got much more involved, the higher education system would start looking a lot more like K-12 schools. Given the low standing of America's public schools, this is not the right direction.

The high cost of college is a concern, as is the growing reliance on loans. But throwing more money at the problem won't ease that burden. There's a direct correlation between increased federal student aid and higher tuition rates.

It's also ironic that Democrats would support this entitlement for better off Americans, given their focus on income inequality and making the rich pay more. Student aid has traditionally been reserved for families who need it most. Clinton's plan turns that model on its head by making free college a nearly universal entitlement.

As Kelly asks, "Does the federal government have a compelling interest to say that those who can contribute don't need to contribute anything?"