



NHSDLC Spring 2020: Sample Pro Case

Academic Committee of the NHSDLC *

February 2020

We stand **PRO** on the resolution, “Resolved: Public colleges and universities in developed countries should be tuition free.” We support our case with the following **2** contentions.

Contention 1: College is a private and public good.

Free college is necessary, not a luxury, as professors Max **Page** and Dan **Clawson** writing in the National Education Association explain: “Just about everyone agrees that college should be more affordable. A century ago high school was becoming a necessity, not a luxury; today the same is happening to college. If college is essential for building a career and being a full participant in our democracy as high school once was, shouldn’t it be free, paid for by public dollars, and treated as a right of all members of our country?”

“We have made K-12 education free because it is good for the individual and for society. The same is true for higher education. As several recent studies have underscored, a college degree is a pathway to a more stable life, financially and otherwise, even for students who struggled in high school. Other studies show that there is no better short-term or long-term investment for the rest of society than higher education. For example, one study shows that new spending on public

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colleges, which would be sparked by an influx of more students, produces more economic activity than a similar-sized tax cut, or similar spending on roads and bridges. And, over their lives, college graduates [...] commit fewer crimes, draw less on social welfare programs, and generate more taxes.”¹

It’s especially important in the 21st century. According to education experts Arne **Duncan** and John **Bridgeland** in 2018: “Education beyond high school is essential for Americans to prosper in the 21st century. Looking into the past, we have seen the majority of those earning a college degree or other postsecondary credential achieve higher earnings, quality of life, civic engagement, and other positive outcomes. Looking ahead, we see a new future where the vast majority of jobs will require some level of postsecondary education. [...] it’s clear that “college for all” should become our national aspiration. [...]

“Many of the success stories that produced these good outcomes for individuals and our country are the result of Americans who got their postsecondary education and training for free in the 1940s, 50s, 60s and 70s. [...] Rice [...] was free to its students until the 1960s. SUNY and CUNY in New York State were virtually free until the 1980s. [...] Many states made sure that the returning World War II veterans and the next two generations had access to a free postsecondary education.

“And it shouldn’t be a surprise that our nation’s economy boomed, along with America’s civic health. In fact, when [...] Roosevelt signed the GI Bill [...] and President Eisenhower signed the National Defense Student Loan legislation [...], millions of veterans, women, and minorities came to college because they could afford it and knew their education beyond high school would make a significant difference in their future livelihood. They bought cars, took out home loans, worked hard, and advanced in their careers. They weren’t burdened by enormous college debt. At the same time, trust in one another and key institutions, as well as civic habits of volunteering, voting and charitable giving, were also on the rise among this Greatest Generation. During this era, the U.S. was first in the world for its college graduates, outpacing Germany, the U.K., and other OECD countries.

[...]

“Today, escalating college costs, stagnant college graduation rates, and the growing \$1.5 trillion in college debt has been put on the backs of our nation’s students and families. Far too many are dimming their hopes for an affordable, quality education beyond high school. These students need help, and local community and

¹Max Page and Dan Clawson (are professors of architecture and sociology, respectively, at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Each previously served as president of the Massachusetts Society of Professors, the 1,400-member union of faculty and librarians, which is a chapter of the Massachusetts Teachers Association, and are active in the statewide union. They are co-authors of *The Future of Higher Education*), “It’s Time to Push for Free College”, no date, National Education Association, <http://www.nea.org/home/62740.htm>.

state leaders have stepped up to the challenge in the absence of a federal redesign. To date, these leaders have established more than 200 tuition-free, college Promise programs [...].

“We shouldn’t stop here, but must continue to advance these programs coast to coast. [...] Acquiring a postsecondary education and continuous learning will be a basic necessity for the millions of Americans whose jobs will increasingly disappear in the global economy, including from robotics and artificial intelligence.”²

Not only is it necessary for economic growth, but free college is also a recognition of a basic human right to education. Mike **Konczal** explains in 2015: “Achieving debt-free public higher education is an important goal for society as a whole [...]. Education is a human right, and anyone who is willing and able should be able to attend an institution of higher education irrespective of their ability to pay for it [...].

“Education is a right that the government must grant. Higher education, then, shouldn’t be left to a handful of private schools, [...] which is only interested in how much it can profit at any given time. The point of public higher education is to collapse precisely this distance between elite and mass education, by ensuring better access and higher quality that would never otherwise be available on a large scale.”³

Contention 2: Universal free college is the best path forward.

There are **3** warrants.

A. The government must get involved in higher education, as Harvard professor David **Deming** notes in 2019: “[...] why don’t students finance a college education out of their own pockets? [...] First, students and their families may not be able to afford college. [...] Unlike a house, investments in education have no obvious source of collateral [...]. Thus private lenders are reluctant to offer unsecured loans. This is why educational loans in the U.S. and many other countries are mostly offered [...] by the government. [...]

²Arne Duncan (Nonresident Senior Fellow of Governance Studies, Brown Center on Education Policy and U.S. Secretary of Education from 2009 - 2015) and John Bridgeland (Former Director - White House Domestic Policy Council under President George W. Bush Vice Chair - Service Year Alliance), “Free college for all will power our 21st-century economy and empower our democracy”, 17 September 2018, Brookings, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2018/09/17/free-college-for-all-will-power-our-21st-century-economy-and-empower-our-democracy/>.

³Mike Konczal (a contributor to The Nation and Dissent Magazine; a fellow at the Roosevelt Institute), “Generation Debt”, Fall 2015, Dissent Magazine, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/mike-konczal-generation-debt-free-college-argument>.

“[S]econd [...] is a lack of information about the costs and benefits of investment in higher education. Survey data consistently show that college-age youth and their parents are misinformed about the average returns to a college degree and to specific college majors [...] Students are unlikely to know with certainty whether college will benefit them until long after the investment decision is made. Thus risk aversion and misperceptions about the returns to education may prevent some youth from attending college.

“A final reason [...] is that the benefits of a more educated populace are widely shared. Education increases civic participation and decreases crime, both of which have spillover impacts on one’s fellow citizens. Workers earn more when they live in cities with more college-educated workers, and employers that locate in these cities are more productive [...]. A recent historical study found that increasing the number of universities in a country led to higher GDP growth [...].”⁴

B. Free college would increase access, as Mike **Konzcal** notes in 2016: “If we transitioned to a system of “debt-free” college, we would certainly be better off. Not only would this increase access to college, it would also take the burden of debt off the backs of many young people starting off their lives. [...] studies find that student loans delay young people’s decision to start a family and get a home, deter them from embarking on public service work, slow entrepreneurship in a period where we need more new businesses, and generally discourage young people from taking the risks society needs them to. And those consequences are even worse for those who don’t graduate.”⁵

C. Only a universal program succeeds, as professor Sara **Goldrick-Rab** notes in 2019: “[...] most politicians continue to think that the way to make college more affordable is to target financial aid to low-income students. [...] Targeted financial aid isn’t getting the job done. It’s time for universal public higher education. Today’s targeted financial aid provides too little to too few. The onerous and inaccurate Free Application for Federal Student Aid divides American families into two unlucky groups. On the one hand, students deemed deserving of help receive aid that is usually far short of the resources required [...]. On the other, students from middle-class families are treated as if they can manage with loans alone. This is both bad public policy and bad politics. Efforts to make college affordable via targeted financial aid are divisive. Families that don’t get aid resent those that do. Over time, the purchasing power of programs like the Pell Grant has eroded for lack

⁴David J. Deming (a U.S. American economist and Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School, Professor of Education and Economics at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Director of the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy), “The Economics of Free College”, June 2019, Policy Brief: 14, Econfip: Economics for Inclusive Prosperity, <https://econfip.org/policy-brief/the-economics-of-free-college/>.

⁵Mike Konzcal (a contributor to The Nation and Dissent Magazine; a fellow at the Roosevelt Institute), “Generation Debt”, “Free Tuition Helps Everyone”, 15 June 2016, Democracy Journal, <https://democracyjournal.org/arguments/free-tuition-helps-everyone/>.

of political support [...] Compare that to the solid support for Medicare and Social Security, [...]. Universal public higher education recognizes that college must be affordable for all if it is to help drive our economy and our democracy. [...] it recognizes that ability to pay is not a marker of talent in America — unleashing the potential in us all.”⁶

Thus, because college is a necessity, not a luxury for millions of people and societies as a whole, and only tuition free college guarantees access, we stand **PRO**.

⁶Sara Goldrick-Rab (a professor of educational policy studies and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the founder of the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, the nation’s first translational research laboratory on college affordability and the author of the forthcoming “Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid and the Betrayal of the American Dream”), “Public Higher Education Should Be Universal and Free”, 20 January 2016, New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/01/20/should-college-be-free/public-higher-education-should-be-universal-and-free>.