

Democratic and Republican Platform Positions on Higher Education

By Don Sutherland

With the Republican Convention kicking off today in Cleveland and the Democratic Convention scheduled to begin a week later in Philadelphia, it is useful to see how Higher Education is reflected in each Party's platform. Below is the draft platform language as of July 12. Although some modest changes are likely by the time the Platforms are adopted, they early language captures how each Party views today's Higher Education landscape. That language also captures each Party's general thinking when it comes to possible reforms.

It should be noted that neither Presidential nominee is bound to accept the Platform. The Platform offers guidance. It is not a binding policy document.

Democratic Party Platform:

Provide Quality and Affordable Education

Higher Education

Democrats believe that if you are an American who wants to get an education, you should always be able to get one: money should never stand in the way. Cost should not be a barrier to getting a degree or credential, and debt should not hold you back after you graduate. Bold new investments by the federal government coupled with states reinvesting in higher education and colleges holding the line on costs, will ensure that Americans of all backgrounds will be prepared for the jobs and economy of the future. We will make community college free, while ensuring the strength of our historically minority-serving institutions. Achieving these goals depends on state and federal investment in both students and their teachers. Whether full-time or adjunct, faculty must be supported to make transformative educational experiences possible. As we make college affordable for future students, we will not forget about the millions of borrowers who need help with their debt right now.

Student Debt

Democrats will allow those who currently have student debt to refinance their loans at the lowest rates possible. We will simplify and expand access to income-based repayment so that no student loan borrowers ever have to pay more than they can afford. And we will significantly cut interest rates for future undergraduates, thereby preventing the federal government from making billions of dollars in profit from student loans. Democrats will also fight for a Student Borrower Bill of Rights to ensure borrowers get adequate information about options to avoid or get out of delinquency or default. We will hold lenders and loan servicers to high standards to help borrowers in default rehabilitate and repay their debts. Finally, Democrats will restore the prior standard in bankruptcy law to allow borrows with student loans discharge their debts in bankruptcy as a measure of last resort.

Minority-Serving Institutions

We will strengthen our nation's public and private Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and Universities, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian-Serving Institutions, and other minority-serving institutions by providing a dedicated fund of tens of billions of dollars to keep costs down, provide a quality education, and provide dedicated support to improve student outcomes and completion rates. These schools play an important role in building opportunity and creating a diverse workforce.

For-Profit Schools

Donald Trump ran a fake university—the now bankrupt Trump “University”—that scammed many out of their hard-earned savings and led to no degree and no obvious benefit to their education or economic prosperity. Democrats will not tolerate this type of fraud. We will also continue to crack down on for-profit schools that take millions in federal financial aid—often as their principal source of revenue—and then exploit students and burden them with debt rather than educating them. That is why we will strengthen the gainful employment rule to ensure that for-profit schools enable students to complete their degrees and prepare them for work. We will go after for-profits that engage in deceptive marketing, fraud and other illegal practices. It is not right that for-profit schools with low graduation rates keep encouraging their students to take out federal loans they will have trouble paying back.

Republican Party Platform:

Title IX

We emphatically support the original, authentic meaning of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. It affirmed that “no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.” That language opened up for girls and women a world of opportunities that had too often been denied to them. That same provision of law is now being used by bureaucrats—and by the current president of the United States—to impose a social and cultural revolution upon the American people. Their agenda has nothing to do with individual rights; it has everything to do with power. They are determined to reshape our schools—and our entire society—to fit the mold of an ideology alien to America’s history and traditions. Their edict to the States concerning restrooms, locker rooms and other facilities is at once illegal, ominous, and ignores privacy issues. We salute the several States which have filed suit against it.

Sexual assault is a terrible crime, and we commend the good faith efforts by law enforcement, educational institutions, and their partners to address that crime responsibly. Whenever reported, it must be promptly investigated by civil authorities and prosecuted in a courtroom, not a faculty lounge. Questions of guilt or innocence must be decided by a judge and jury, with guilt determined beyond a reasonable doubt. Those convicted of sexual assault should be punished to the full extent of the law. The Administration’s distortion of Title IX to micromanage the way colleges and universities deal with allegations of abuse contravenes our country’s legal traditions

and must be halted before it further muddles this complex issue and prevents the proper authorities from investigating and prosecuting sexual assault effectively with due process.

Improving Higher Education

Our colleges and universities, large and small, public and private, form the world's greatest assemblage of learning. They drive much of the research that keeps America competitive and, by admitting large numbers of foreign students, convey our values and culture to the world. Their excellence is undermined by an ideological bias deeply entrenched within the current university system. Whatever the solution may be in private institutions, in State schools the trustees have a responsibility to the taxpayers to ensure that their enormous investment is not abused for political indoctrination. We call on State officials to preserve our public colleges and universities as places of learning and the exchange of ideas, not zones of intellectual intolerance or "safe zones," as if college student (sic) need protection from the free exchange of ideas. We condemn the campus-based BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) campaign against Israel. It is anti-Semitism and should be denounced by advocates of academic freedom.

College Costs

The cost of a college education has long been on an unsustainable trajectory, rising year by year far ahead of inflation. Nationwide, student debt now exceeds credit card debt with average debt levels per student totaling roughly \$27,000. Delinquency rates on student loans are now as high as they were on subprime mortgages during the housing crisis. Over half of recent college grads are unemployed or underemployed, working at jobs for which their expensive educations gave them no preparation. We need new systems of learning to compete with traditional four-year schools: technical institutions, online universities, life-long learning, and work-based learning in the private sector. Public policy should advance their affordability, innovation, and transparency and should recognize that a four year degree from a brick-and-mortar institution is not the only path toward a prosperous and fulfilling career.

The federal government should not be in the business of originating student loans. In order to bring down college costs and give students access to a multitude of financing options, private sector participation in student financing should be restored. Any regulation that increases college costs must be challenged to balance its worth against its negative economic impact on students and their families.

In order to encourage new modes of higher education delivery to enter the market, accreditation should be de-coupled from federal financing, and States should be empowered to allow a wide array of accrediting and credentialing bodies to operate. This model would foster innovation, bring private industry into the credentialing market, and give students the ability to customize their college experience.