Opinion
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Last week, I wrote about how Democratic candidates should discuss the issue of health care, specifically how to discuss Medicare for All proposals. A similarly ambitious proposal is to eliminate tuition at public colleges and universities and to forgive much of the debt currently held by former students. How should the Democrats discuss this?

Let me first stipulate that I am far less enthusiastic about the idea of free public college than I am about Medicare for All. But some version of free college, or much reduced student loan debt, is being put forward by virtually all the candidates for the Democratic nomination, and so considering how to discuss it, now and during the general election, seems worthwhile.

The most important, absolutely vital, if-you-don't-do-this-you-will-hand-Donald-Trump-another-term thing to be said on this topic is to point out that there is something even more important, namely, what the government can do to help those young people who do not go to college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 30% of high school graduates do not go to college. As recently as the year 2000, over 10% of students did not finish high school, although that number declined to 6.1%in 2016. No matter how you cut it, a lot of young people do not go to college, and Democrats can help shed their image as elitist by focusing on how we, as a country, can help kids learn a trade or how to farm, and how such work is just as dignified — if not more so — than being a college professor or a journalist.

Here is story to illustrate why this is necessary. I was speaking one day with the young man who did the plumbing in my bathroom and is now building a gazebo with a carpenter friend of his. I told him two friends were coming to visit, and one of them was a woman who was so smart that a conversation with her always left me feeling really dumb. He replied, "Think how I feel." I pointed out that I have yet to find something he doesn't know how to fix, and if he doubted who was the smarter, he could ask how many checks he had written to me in the last year versus the number I had written to him. (His sister, a physicians' assistant, makes twice what I do as a journalist.) Much in our culture celebrates college and unintentionally puts down those who do not go to college. The Democratic Party needs to remember its roots in

the working class and make sure those who do not go to college are valued and helped as much as the college-bound.

Similarly, not all college-bound students are going to be learning about the Renaissance, although I hope the liberal arts will always be attractive to some people and a part of all four-year programs. Many colleges have two-year programs that help train young people for a variety of jobs like nursing, computer programming and applied engineering. There are 6.7 million students in two-year programs compared to 13.3 million in four-year programs, so we are not talking about a small number of potential voters. Half of all college students are at a community college. Candidates need to talk about this, seeing as most of them went to elite schools.

The policy goal of free tuition is to help these young people, and the political goal is to make sure the American people see the pragmatic side of these issues — and not tag the Democrats as the party of the elites.

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Candidates typically begin the discussion of free college by pointing to the crushing load of debt recent graduates have. Starting with the lived experience of your audience is always a smart place to start a conversation. But, seeing as Republicans will scream that "taxpayer money" is going to pay for these free college plans, it behooves Democrats to explain why we need more young people to go to college to get the training for the jobs of the digital and post-fossil fuel economy.

The candidates then discuss how we all have an investment in helping each of us reach his and her God-given potential, which is all to the good. In fact, on this topic of helping each other thrive, political discourse tends to get as close to Catholic common good language as American political discourse gets. This is all to the good.

Four additional items need to make it into candidates' discussion of this topic. First, we know that many young people are delaying starting a family because of their college loan debt. Republicans like to claim they are the "pro-family" party, which usually just means they are anti-gay. But, if you really want to help families, reducing or eliminating college debt is a big step in the right direction.

Second, in discussing how to pay for this, it would be useful to point out that many of our national competitors pay for college: Why should young people in Sweden and China have an advantage over our American kids? As well, many corporations used to train workers when they were hired, but now those corporations look to the public sector to invest in such training. That's fine, so long as corporations are taxed to pay for the training.

Third, what about private colleges? I know that several candidates have spoken about the need to support historically black colleges, some of which are private and some public. Our Catholic colleges will be at a disadvantage as well, but let's face it: We are entering prickly territory at a time when many Catholic schools feel torn between upholding the church's teaching, especially in areas of human sexuality, and welcoming LGBT students and faculty. It would be good to find a way to help schools with a religious identity in a way that does not raise fraught constitutional issues. I have wracked my brains trying to think of something beyond the current status, but I have come up empty.

Fourth, as an example of good stewardship, candidates promoting free college must also present a plan to not only contain but to reduce the exploding cost of higher education. There are many reasons why tuition has increased on average 8% each year in the past 50 years, twice the rate of inflation in the entire economy, but the most basic reason is: Colleges can raise the tuition rates because the demand for a college education continues to grow and because the availability of financial aid provides a steady diet of cash. Simplifying regulations so that a university needs fewer administrators and compliance officers would be a good first step. Beyond that, expecting a public school to achieve greater savings should be a requirement as part of being eligible for the school's students to participate in the free tuition program.

Over the years, I have written often about how cultural elites think their education confers a moral worth, which it emphatically does not. There really are people in Cambridge, on the Upper West Side, and in Berkley who fit the caricature. Any candidate who displays even a whiff of that elite cultural snootiness is doomed. Talking about free college needs to be presented as a middle- and working-class program, more like the GI Bill than a freebie for spoiled rich kids.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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