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Pell Grant cuts would spell strife for Catholic students

by Kate Childs Graham

Young Voices

Like millions of Catholic college students, Ryan Fecteau is excited to return to campus this week. His junior year at the The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., is filled with promise. Fecteau is a political science major whose focus on politics extends past the classroom. An aspiring policymaker, he was recently elected to the position of city commissioner in his hometown of Biddleford, Maine. On campus, he is speaker of the university's Student Association, communications director of CUA College Democrats and executive director of CUAllies.

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Fecteau is also a recipient of a Pell Grant, a program that helps millions of low-income students afford college.

Twelve percent of students at the university are Pell Grant recipients. With tuition at \$35,000 per year and room and board at \$13,000, "Pell Grants are incredibly important to make college affordable," Fecteau said.

However, not all share this view. Rep. Paul Ryan, a Catholic, has sculpted a budget endorsed by Mitt Romney that limits Pell Grant eligibility, cutting the Pell Grant program by \$170 billion in the next decade. According to Education Trust, a national education reform organization, this could lead to more than 1 million students losing their Pell Grants entirely in the next 10 years.

One of these students could be Fecteau. His dad is a small-business owner, his mom a nurse. As a child, he says, Fecteau was challenged to "shoot for the stars" and expected to "build a better tomorrow." To reach those lofty goals, he set out to go to a Catholic college. Facing mountains of debt, his family applied for federal funding and qualified.

If they had not, Fecteau said, "I would have needed larger loans with more long-term costs in interest.

Without these federal loans, there would be a significant strain on my family."

Fecteau's story is remarkable but not uncommon. Take Nhu Huynh. She graduated from Boston College in 2008 and is currently studying theology at Harvard Divinity School. At Boston College, she was involved with campus ministry. She went on retreats and led immersion trips abroad. She interned with Catholic Charities of Boston. Like Fecteau, Huynh received Pell Grants every semester she attended the university.

"If I did not receive the Pell Grants," Huynh said, "I would have attended the local community college and transferred to an in-state four-year institution."

However, Huynh, who became Catholic while at Boston College, would not have traded her experience there.

"Boston College is the place in which I flourished as a human being, not only from the liberal arts curriculum in which a love of learning is equated with a love of thy neighbor, thus, reflective of a greater lover of God, but from the great desire to challenge structures which oppose justice," she said.

Both Fecteau and Huynh stand to lose if the Romney-Ryan budget becomes reality and the Pell Grant program is cut.

A moral budget

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Ryan said his budget was crafted "using my Catholic faith."

In their college classrooms, at one point or many, Fecteau and Nuynh studied Catholic social teaching. For each of these students, it's clear the Romney-Ryan budget is not in line with what they studied.

"It's baffling to me that Ryan would say that his budget is at all aligned with Catholic social teaching," Huynh said, "and it is offensive to mask his budget plan as anything but a violent systematic attack upon the most vulnerable of our society."

Fecteau quoted the Gospel of Matthew: "For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink."

"I would challenge," Fecteau said, "that the Romney-Ryan plan does not reflect this passage in any way, shape or form."

Catholic women religious and bishops have shared similar sentiments.

In a letter to Congress, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said the Romney-Ryan budget "fails to meet" the moral criteria of the church, writing, "A just spending bill cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor and vulnerable persons."

The bishops instead favor the Obama administration FY 2013 budget "to strengthen programs that serve poor and vulnerable people, such as Pell Grants."

Ryan replied he shared the bishops' "commitment to a preferential option for the poor."

Catholic sisters, through NETWORK, a Catholic social justice lobby, organized a 15-day bus tour coined "Nuns on the Bus." On the tour, they educated communities about the impact of the Romney-Ryan budget.

The budget "rejects church teaching about solidarity, inequality, the choice for the poor, and the common good. That's wrong," said Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, at the end of the first trip. The sisters are planning a second trip after Romney selected Ryan as his running mate for November's election.

For Fecteau, the Romney-Ryan budget and its proposed cuts to Pell Grants has given him renewed motivation for the election.

"Catholic college students must educate ourselves before we head to the ballot box this November," Fecteau said. "There is so much at stake for us. And we've got to stand up for what our Catholic faith tells us -- to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The Romney-Ryan budget just doesn't make the grade."

[Kate Childs Graham is an activist in the progressive Catholic movement. A graduate of the Catholic University of America and the U.N. mandated University for Peace in Costa Rica, she currently serves as speechwriter for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME).]

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