

Young Democratic Socialists 2009-2010 Activist Agenda Proposals

Chris Maisano

1) Free Higher Ed

As democratic socialists, we believe that education is a human right, and that all citizens should be entitled to free public higher education from preschool through graduate study. This right has been recognized in many societies throughout the world, including in many Western European nations, but in the United States, higher education is becoming increasingly costly, pushing many students into debt before they even begin their adult lives.

As the Debt Hits Hard project notes, the cost of higher education in the United States is staggering:

- Over six in ten college graduates are burdened with educational debt. Of those, four in ten, and more than half of African-American and Hispanic borrowers, are burdened with an unmanageable level of debt. (Financial experts define unmanageable debt as the salary-to-debt threshold at which an individual is only able to repay his/her loans with significant economic hardship.)
- Student debt in the United States is more than \$471 billion – and that’s not including private loans.
- Between 2001 and 2010, 2 million academically qualified students will not go to college because they can’t afford it.
- The average student today graduates with debt twice that of graduates a decade ago⁴ - and enters a job market where the average job pays them less than it would have in 2000.
- The general cost of living is increasing at a rapid pace. College textbooks, for instance, have tripled in price since 1986 and are becoming ever-larger culprits of student debt.⁶
- The average college senior now graduates with \$3200⁷ in credit card debt and \$18,900 in student loans.
- Graduates of public colleges and universities accumulate almost as much debt as their peers at private institutions.

These costs exercise an overwhelmingly negative influence on the economic opportunities and social lives of many students:

- Student debt is outpacing the starting salaries of jobs in teaching and social work, making it virtually impossible for many debt-laden graduates to pursue careers in fields where they are desperately needed. Nearly one quarter of all graduates from public universities and almost 4 in 10 graduates from private universities have levels of student debt that would become unmanageable at the salaries of starting teachers.
- More and more students are delaying major life decisions as a result of increased student debt. Thirty-eight percent of college graduates delay buying their first house because of debt, 14% delay marriage, 21% delay having kids. From 1991 to 2002, those figures rose by margins of 52%, 100% and 75%, respectively.”

As the social critic Jeffrey A. Williams has argued, the student debt system undermines democracy and social solidarity in crucial ways. Debt teaches us that education is a consumer service, restricts many from entering lower-paying career fields oriented toward public service and education, and further inculcates in students a market-oriented and individualistic worldview. The contemporary student debt system must be abolished, and the best way to do that is to organize for free, publicly funded higher education for all citizens. To that end, Young Democratic Socialists should adopt and further the Free Higher Ed! campaign initiated by the Labor Party (see <http://www.freehighered.org>).

Highlights of the campaign

- The total cost of tuition and fees for everyone enrolled in public higher education is relatively low, at approximately \$25 billion.
- No age limit, full and part-time students covered.
- Universities and colleges retain control over admissions standards.
- The program is universal. Everyone who gains admission to a public institution of higher learning, regardless of income, is covered.
- Public institutions enroll over 80 percent of all students in higher education. Cost of enrollment in private institutions not covered.

This campaign would obviously not be won right away. It is a proposal for a long-term organizing project that YDS can use to build a broad-based coalition in support of free public education from preschool through graduate study for all, and in doing so, win people over to our politics. However, there are many projects that YDS chapters can engage in this year to begin working toward the ultimate goal of free higher education:

- Hold public events to educate students and community members about the campaign.
- Organize to have your student government and faculty and staff union locals pass resolutions supporting the demand for free higher education.
- Begin working to influence the US Student Association to adopt and organize for free higher education.
- Begin educating state- and federal-level elected officials on this issue pressure them to introduce free public higher education legislation.
- Incorporate the demand for free public higher education in any ongoing student debt campaigns your chapter may be involved in.

This campaign should be a long-term priority for Young Democratic Socialists. It combines organizing for a reform that can improve millions of lives in the here and now with a critique of corporate capitalism and a vision of a truly democratic society in which all citizens have free and equal access to basic social goods. It will show people that our politics are not only relevant to practical, everyday concerns but also visionary. In a time of crisis and rising economic uncertainty for millions of Americans, the time is right to demand free public higher education for all.